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Chase Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and the Neo-Victorian: The Problematization of South-Africa and the Vulnerability and Resistance of the Black Other

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Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz,

"Problematization of South-Africa and the Vulnerability and Resistance of the Black Other"

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.1 (2019)**

Special Issue ***Gendered Bodies in Transit: Between Vulnerability and Resistance***. Ed. Manuela Coppola and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz

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Abstract: This article touches upon issues of captivity, suppression, misrepresentations and exclusion of black people from a historical and cultural point of view through the analysis of Chase-Riboud's neo-Victorian novel *Hottentot Venus* (2003). It also focuses on the implications and consequences for contemporary South Africa of situations of slavery and exploitation of African descended peoples. Notions of identity and moral and legal inclusion of black women into past and contemporary societies and communities will be also discussed from the point of view of postcolonial and gender and sexuality studies. The complexities of blackness and the violation of human rights as a result of these will be a substantial argument throughout the text represented in the historical and fictional character of the Venus Hottentot. She was seen as the icon of sexual deviancy and became a victim of the white colonizer as the embodiment of black racialized sexuality for Europeans. However, despite her vulnerability, in the narrative she gains agency in resistance in Butlerian terms. In the *Hottentot Venus*, Barbara Chase-Riboud tries to bring to light the experience and the memory of slavery as they constitute a key element in the reconstruction of the past and in the construction of a better future. Similarly, the process of recovery and identity construction in a postcolonial era determined by the traces of colonial trauma is an important element in the fictionalization of Sarah Baartman's life as an icon of the idealization and problematization of South-Africa. These issues bring to the fore questions of race and feminism, the idealization of the colonies and colonized people in contrast with white imperial subjects, and the consideration of the contemporary neo-slave narrative as a neo-Victorian genre.

Maria Isabel ROMERO RUIZ

Chase Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and the Neo-Victorian: The Problematization of South-Africa and the Vulnerability and Resistance of the Black Other

As a symbol of the commodification of the black female body, the *Hottentot Venus* has become the focus of recent academic research, and her life and death constitute an early example of the exploitation of female black sexuality and for the colonization and representation of South Africa. Saartjie Baartman's tour around England and France of during the nineteenth century, and the scientific debates that the exceptional size of her back and genitals provoked, attracted the interest of a middle-class audience, especially in the freak shows of London and Paris. As a result, she became the embodiment of black racialized sexuality and deviancy, exemplifying the notion of the "exotic" and the "other" for the white European imagination. A victim of slavery both in South Africa and Europe, she never regained her freedom and represented the spectacle of the primitive when she was alive and beyond her death.

As a neo-Victorian novel, the *Hottentot Venus* (2003) tries to recover from oblivion the story of a woman whose life represents the extreme vilification of the black female body and sexuality but in a fictionalized way. In this context, Chase-Riboud tries to question issues of sexual exploitation and discrimination and to re-write the history of slave-women giving a voice to the victims. The experience and the memory of slavery constitute a key element in the reconstruction of the past and in the construction of a better future, making the readers revise their perspective on history and its implications for the present. Similarly, the process of recovery and identity construction in a postcolonial era determined by the traces of colonial trauma is an important element in the fictionalization of Sarah Baartman's life as an icon of the idealization and problematization of South-Africa. Also, the author resorts to spectrality to give her protagonist some agency in a way that reflects on contemporary theories about vulnerability and resistance. In Judith Butler's words, "we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (12). Similarly, the aim of the narrative is to symbolize the silenced voices of subaltern colonial people that haunt our present postcolonial societies. These issues bring to the fore questions of race and feminism, the idealization of the colonies and colonized people in contrast with white imperial subjects, and the consideration of the contemporary neo-slave narrative as a neo-Victorian genre. Notions of identity and moral and legal inclusion of black women into past and contemporary societies and communities will be also discussed from the point of view of postcolonial and gender and sexuality studies. Finally, the complexities of blackness and the violation of human rights as a result of these will be a substantial argument throughout the text.

Therefore, this article will first discuss the neo-slave narrative as a subgenre within neo-Victorian studies to see to which extent tropes of neo-Victorianism such as traces of the past, ventriloquism or spectrality can be found in the novel while at the same time rewriting the story of a slave woman. Secondly, this article will argue that the *Venus Hottentot* can exemplify the black experience of "the other" and her commodified body is a repository of memory and trauma representing resistance and resilience against exploitation and violence, writing back to empire and colonialism. However, what I will attempt to contest is that despite independence and modernity, South-Africa is still a country in which black women are vulnerable and are often victims of sexual violence, while at the same time not being granted the category of human, and all this despite the idealization of this country in the novel. Finally, I will try to show how Chase-Riboud makes an attempt to present Sarah's revenge on white civilization after death as a tool for asserting black female subjectivity and agency and for achieving healing.

The *Hottentot Venus* can be read as a neo-slave narrative situated in the context of neo-Victorian fiction. The fact that neo-Victorian novels are historical fictions which rewrite, repossess and interpret the past is conspicuously relevant to Chase-Riboud's novel. Also the idea that these texts give voice to the oppressed, the silent and the deviant in order to make a claim for political justice has many points of coincidence with the postcolonial and the reformulation of "otherness" with its consequences for the present. Similarly, the neo-Victorian genre is particularly concerned with issues of entertainment and ethnographic exhibition and with the colonial, scientific and medical discourses that determined the observation and interpretation of the racialized body in the nineteenth century. Issues of race relations and gender conventions are intermingled in the plot, and some of the literary conventions of the neo-slave literary form and the neo-Victorian genre can be found in the text, together with many of the features of the historical novel.

In neo-Victorianism, authors and their audience share their interest and their preoccupation about the past and its implications for our contemporary societies. Both history and fiction are artificial constructs, so their truth can be challenged and remodeled. Postmodernism provides the theoretical stance for historical fiction and the possibility to reinterpret past events with multiple readings in our postmodern cultures (Heilmann and Llewellyn, "Historical Fictions" 139-141). Therefore, neo-Victorian writers "are not merely looking back, but using their appropriation of form, style and theme to make some kind of intervention in our understanding of the Victorian period," casting an image that Victorians did not have of themselves in all probability as they were constrained by the social and literary limitations of their time (Preston 99). That image must also include the fact that Britain was an imperial power and that life in the colonies and their presence in the metropolis were part of the picture. The fact that neo-Victorian studies have fluid and widening boundaries regarding time and space allows for the inclusion of places like South-Africa in the fictionalization of a British colonial past; in the same way, the interest in socio-political justice in relation to events and characters from that past makes the rewriting of tales of slavery and racial exploitation relevant to the neo-Victorian genre. These rewritings would permit us to apply the prefix "neo" to contemporary slave narratives that analyze colonial issues from a contemporary approach. In that respect, neo-slave narratives make use of the form, style and theme of the slave narratives that were written as the testimony of men and women in bondage.

Neo-slave narratives have their origins in the slave narratives that were born at the end of the eighteenth century during the rise of the transatlantic abolitionist movement. They recorded the harshness and cruelty of life under slavery and became political and social documents whose main concern was accuracy and authenticity. Slave narratives were stories based on individual personal experiences that had a linear structure and focused on the theme of conversion to Christianity and the acquisition of freedom (Hawkins 4-5). However, the neo-slave narrative was born as a genre in the 1960s and has been critical towards dominant ideology, providing counter-narratives of slavery and its criticism. Although justice and reparation can never be totally achieved, the move towards reconciliation can make the healing process easier. These narratives are liberatory in the sense that they offer an alternative account of events different from the official one, destabilizing post-colonial powers (Keizer 6-7). Similarly, these narratives focus not only on the experience of enslavement, but also on the development of the notion of freedom, becoming liberatory narratives which are concerned with "the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorised self" (Mitchell 4). In this context, the neo-slave narrative becomes a literary form that represents the experiences of ethnic minorities and women and the legacy of slavery, connecting with one of the main characteristics of the neo-Victorian genre. Both literary forms try to induce changes in our current societies and to provoke political resistance by reversing history and presenting it from different angles (Hawkins 1-12). All these features can be discerned in Chase-Riboud's fiction and justify her inclusion of South Africa in the scope of contemporary neo-slave narratives. At the same time, black women's vulnerability and their resulting acts of resistance become the center of the debate.

In Marie-Luise Kohlke's words, these neo-Victorian postcolonial texts can be approached in terms of their "wider cultural antecedents, current and future socio-political implications, and increasing globalized contexts" (3). The traumatic experience of colonization and sexual exploitation is present throughout the novel, as when Sarah's childhood and early youth are narrated as experiences in which she loses all the things she loves and attach her to South-Africa. This is the case of her parents, her husband and her baby who are killed at the hands of the white colonizers in her fictionalized story. Those killings can be explained by the white man's greed for land and their fight for colonization: "The Khoekhoe were at war with the Dutch, who had arrived years ago and who were themselves at war with the English, who fought us, the Dutch and the Trekboers for possession of what no one really owned: the land" (Chase-Riboud 14). Therefore, it was the ownership of land which caused her parents' deaths, as Sarah herself explains in the novel: "Five years after my mother died, he [her father] too was killed by the same English landlords for trespassing onto a cattleman's land while driving his bullocks to market" (Chase-Riboud 15). She thus became an orphan and was witness to the destruction and massacre of the Hottentot people, a crime that was never punished and still has to be redeemed. Although in real life she had several children and lovers, she was always subjected to white domination, first as an indentured servant and later as an ethnographic spectacle in Europe. She was also raped or sexually abused by her masters, becoming an example of the atrocities committed against the colonized "others," as we shall see.

One key aspect of the neo-Victorian genre is that it has become a historical narrative in itself, and together with other sub-genres such as the neo-gothic, the neo-sensation or the neo-realist, the neo-slave genre has emerged as a neo-Victorian literary form since it rewrites and reassesses traces from

the colonial past (Bowler and Cox 6). Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* establishes the uncertainty of history and the continuity of the colonial past in our postcolonial presents when he affirms that "Appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretations of the present." According to him, it is not only a question of agreement or disagreement with the events that happened in that past, but about the "uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded" (1). The extent to which that colonial past determines and influences our postcolonial societies and allows us to engage in processes of appropriation and adaptation of former times enables the inclusion of narratives of slavery in the neo-Victorian project. At the same time, issues of Empire are clearly the object of concern of neo-Victorian fiction as in the nineteenth century Britain was at its height as a colonial power which spread as far as Asia, Africa, Australia and the Americas; therefore, the presence of the "other" in the metropolis was far more common than traditionally acknowledged in Victorian conventional representations. This does not mean that new depictions of slavery lack authenticity in a realist sense because neo-Victorian writers base their use of history on research.

Nonetheless, the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred in these portrayals, and we can find many instances of them in the novel that is the object of my discussion. There is for example some historical uncertainty regarding some aspects of Sarah Baartman's life and other relevant events as well, and there is a very thin line between historical and fictional material. The protagonist, Sarah Baartman, gains control over the narrative through the use of the first-person narrative – ventriloquism – following the neo-Victorian trend of recovering the utterances of those oppressed by history, but in a fragmentary way. This is because the other characters also assume the roles of narrators giving a different angle to the events in the story and it is only at the end that Chase-Riboud gives agency to Sarah, as we shall see. This is another feature of the neo-slave narrative which shows an outstanding control on the part of the writer in the display of various truths through "non-linear, circular and multi-layered voices" that represent the polyphony of interpretations of the past (Hawkins 14).

As a neo-Victorian novel, the *Hottentot Venus* recovers a cultural aspect of the Victorian past to reflect on contemporary issues of sexual and racial discrimination: the freak show. Freak shows became an international business associated with the expansion of the British Empire and the process of colonization. Ethnographic exhibitions showed the cultural anxieties and fear of miscegenation that pervaded European nineteenth century societies. It was white supremacy that was at stake and this supremacy was associated with the immorality and ignorance of colonial peoples in all western cultural discourses (Durbach 3-4). However, in opposition to this, the neo-Victorian novel and within it the neo-slave narrative try to write back, to contest that notion of white supremacy and tell the story from the other side, establishing hybridity as a middle ground to destabilize Western discourses of power. Both animals and "exotic peoples as emblems of imperial conquest" invaded the public arena and became an attraction that proved to be really lucrative for entrepreneurs (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism* 123). In this context, Sarah Baartman, the *Hottentot Venus*, became an icon of hyper-sexualized racial difference thanks to her two main body features: her *Hottentot* apron, that is, her elongated labia, and her *steatopygia* or the prodigious size of her buttocks and hips. Following Judith Butler's notion of vulnerability, bodies become vulnerable in their social and material relations (16), and black women's bodies interact with white bodies in a context of social and economic inferiority that can be found in our protagonist.

Thus, the *Venus Hottentot*'s story is especially relevant for the rewriting and revision through remembrance of a colonial past of slavery and its consequences for our postcolonial present; her body becomes the site of memory for that past of exploitation and trauma. The experience of being "the other" is fundamental to analyze its political consequences, becoming the main issue in ethnic writers' texts. Black women's identities and bodies need to be asserted and recovered by feminism as well as their agency despite their vulnerability. Women of color writing historical fiction have as their objective to write the story of resistance by ethnic minorities outside the white male tradition (Heilmann and Llewellyn, "Historical Fictions" 142). For that, the sexual exploitation and oppression of black women has to be brought to the fore to analyze the evolution of societies such as that of South Africa after the end of the Apartheid and in the process of becoming a developed egalitarian country. In European thought "the Other" has appropriately been defined as negatively different from "the Self" and waiting to be assimilated and, as a consequence, many neo-slave narratives have tried to negotiate concepts of colonial foreignness in a British or European setting (Khair 9). The *Hottentot Venus* is an example of the attempt to redefine the identity of "the other" and of letting the subaltern speak, following Spivak's notion in her famous and endlessly quoted essay.

There are many examples in the narrative where Chase-Riboud mocks the English audiences and compares their behavior to that of the animals. Civilization is taken for granted in white people but is

seen as missing in black people. However, the author illustrates how sometimes the opposite happens. For instance, when Sarah says the following: "Men, and more and more regularly, women would poke me with their canes and parasols, make faces, shout gibberish and curses, rattle the cage to make me fall, spit and hurl insults they thought I didn't understand. Sometimes I noticed a look of pity, even a tear on a spectator's face. When that happened, my day was unbearable, for only then would I admit that I was still human" (Chase-Riboud 10). Words like these make one think that civilization is not always on the right side. Neo-Victorianism allows us to question western European superiority both now and in the past. Chase-Riboud needs to question these binaries in the present because in our contemporary communities we still find examples of the inhuman treatment of certain racial groups against others, and South-Africa is no exception, where the demonstrations of violence have reached a level that was unthinkable after independence from British domination. Because she feels inhuman, Sarah becomes an alcoholic and a drug addict; under their effects, she finds the strength to bear the humiliation she suffers as an exhibit of sexual deviance.

Although contemporary South Africa is not emblematic of civilization and equity in human relations, Chase-Riboud establishes the Hottentot tribe as the group of people where these moral and social values were predominant. Their traditions should be taken as the model for appropriate behavior according to Western civilized standards. These are revealed for example in their defense of women's rights in marriage, according to which women are not reduced to their husbands' property and to a state of slavery and subjugation sanctioned by law, in contrast with European customs. Likewise, the political organization of Khoesan tribes and clans expressed a degree of civilization that was not very common in British society: chiefs were elected and there was no individual authority in the figure of a king, a noble or a dictator: "There was no word in Khoe for property or slave" (Chase-Riboud 22). The land was shared by everyone and could not be the property of one person, denying thus all the principles of colonialism and racial exploitation, and contributing once more to the idealization of South-Africa. This idealization equated the country and its primitiveness in the past with the present day values of respect, tolerance and humanity. In this sense, it is Sarah's body that represents these ancestral humane values and the memory of a South-African past where power and land were in the hands of the people: she represents resistance to white colonial law. In contrast, Europeans found the Hottentots to be "everything that was ugly, savage, uncivilized, brutal, deformed, reprehensible" (Chase-Riboud 6). Even Sarah's physical attributes and her sexuality had their roots in the traditions of her South-African ancestors, despite their appearance of savagery. Her apron and her enormous buttocks were more important than her virginity to her people, and their size and shape were representative of their value and beauty. Hottentot women reserved these traits for their husbands and they constituted their essential attraction for white men who wanted to experience the excitement that their reproductive organs produced and the lure of the exotic.

Sarah Baartman was the property of various masters who in different ways tried to subjugate her will and possess her most cherished treasure. According to one of her biographers, Alexander Dunlop married her in England and she had a child by him, who died like the others (Clifton and Scully 108-109). Like many other African black women, she was the victim of sexual abuse and rape at the hands of white colonizers. She was coerced into practicing fellatio on her first master in the novel, Peter Caesar, but, according to Sarah, he was a strict *pater familias* and one of her most important references in life: "My master was well known as a good, strict, Calvinist white African, fair and God-fearing. So despite what had happened, Master Peter became the voice of authority in my new life. He never again touched me once I was under his roof, and for that I was grateful" (Chase-Riboud 44). She also suffered the violation of her second master, Hendrik Caesar, who treats her as a sexual commodity and as an insatiable black woman, following the idea that Europeans had of black sexuality: "You asked me for this. You've been asking for this ever since I saw you. [...] I'll be good to you. I've been told you Hottentot women have a jewel between your legs that can drive a man insane" (53). Even the anatomist Cuvier, her last master in the novel, tried to rape her. In real life, he was the one to practice a post-mortem dissection on her, but she refused to be examined by him when she was alive, which can be interpreted as an act of agency and resistance (Clifton and Scully 135). The bodies of black women were tormented and insulted in slavery, and most sexual encounters between masters and slave women took place under coercion; their stories were and are recounted in slave and neo-slave narratives. Rape was employed as the means to subjugate black women and to undermine black men's morals, and the result of sexual oppression and abuse by the white man as, according to Angela Davis, "It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges, otherwise stifled by the specter of white womanhood's chastity." In her view "Rape was a weapon

of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (23-24). Sadly, this is still happening in South-Africa.

The female body becomes the object of oppression in patriarchal societies, but white and black bodies have distinct roles in a capitalistic society: white women's bodies are immaculate, lack sexuality and guarantee the purity of the breed; black women's bodies are commodified as reproductive bodies and have a significant value in the labor market from which white women disappeared after the Industrial Revolution (Ishida 63). White men also felt attracted by the exotic features of their slaves and saw these women as seductresses, committing atrocities against them which included not only sexual exploitation but also other forms of violence. Black women's subjectivities were stifled because they were regarded as pernicious and they had no proprietary right over their own bodies, being excluded from white society and rights on account of racial hierarchy (Ishida 69, 72). Enslaved women's bodies are under captivity becoming "the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality." This process makes them vulnerable and subjectless, transforming them into the representation of "otherness." In contrast with white women's bodies, black women's bodies are not beautiful in the western imagination and they become flesh, uniting ethnicity and desire, but lacking any form of power (Spillers 67). The exploitation of the woman slave's body represented the idea of control and conquest for the white master through her possession both sexually and as a commodity. Black women became defenseless in front of violence that destroyed their identities (Hill Collins 166-167).

However, Chase-Riboud introduces an important feature at the end of the novel, one that gives agency to Sarah through reference to her spectral presence, another trope in neo-Victorian fiction that can be found in the *Hottentot Venus*. Sarah's spiritual revenge justifies the inclusion of the novel in the neo-gothic genre as a neo-slave narrative and also explains her acts of resistance and resilience. Neo-slave narratives "'resurrect' the dead so that they haunt the living." This is done in a way that enables contemporary readerships to revive a past of horror that has "enduring effects on the future" (Rushdy 5). Also, the fin-de-siècle Victorian fascination with death, sex and the spiritual carries spectral connotations; similarly, novels introducing the motif of spectrality pay a tribute to the dead, the voiceless and the marginalized, among which is the racialized other in Victorian times. Colonized people, like ghosts, were erased from Victorian mainstream culture. In my view, there is a positive approach to female black identity in Sarah's vengeance against all her oppressors that leads to her agency based on acts of resistance. It is by means of her manifestation as a ghost that Sarah can develop her own identity and be witness to the atrocities of the world; the twentieth century is a time of exacerbated violence against women and minorities, and also of frequent struggles to own the land. But it is through vulnerability and resilience that the identities of peoples that have been subjected to trauma and violence can be constructed. Therefore, black women can define their future and their identities through their commitment to their own reality, without forgetting their history of sexual exploitation, enslavement and commodification. In this frame of thought, Sarah's identity emerges after her death as a symbol of female black subjectivity and even as a symbol of South-Africa after the Apartheid. In this sense, it is feminism that can construct networks of solidarity through resistance to destabilize "those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice" and to criticize "those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities" (Butler 20).

Sarah takes revenge on all those members of the western civilization and the scientific world who had abused and exploited her by haunting them to death. She carries with her as a ghost the trans-generational trauma that black African people had suffered throughout history. Her vulnerability in life becomes her best weapon with acts of resistance and resilience after death. Alice Unicorn, her friend and one of the narrators in the story, claims that she "hated what men had done to her, all of them, with their locks and their contracts, their penises and their pretensions, their dicks and their diplomacy, their codpieces full of hot air, their wars and their science, their factories and their industries, their progress and their enlightenment, their establishment and their dreams of glory" (Chase-Riboud 276).

Sarah Baartman represented all that ethnic minorities, black people and especially black women had suffered in the name of civilization. However, black female bodies can also be seen as potentially subversive sites of memory and resistance, laying claim to the past. Satya P. Mohanty talks in her realist post-positivist theory about claiming the ancestral past to define one's identity. She also establishes the task of "rememory" as one "dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labour of trusting oneself, one's judgements, one's companions." Re-memory also means gaining recovery from the atrocities of the colonial past and achieving agency. Therefore "historical memory" includes collectives in the processes of remembering through feeling and knowing, through personal collective experiences (43-48). Ron Eyerman's use of the idea of cultural trauma to situate slavery in the formation of African American identity is relevant to the case of South-Africa. A cultural trauma, according to him, is "a

collective memory of some overwhelmingly negative situation experienced by members of a particular social group" (Qtd. in Smith and Riley 244). In the case of black women, and particularly of South-African women, it is clear that it was slavery that marked them and their descendants as a traumatic experience. This process is closely connected with the notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in relation to the experience of slavery.

Sarah's mortal remains were still deprived of burial in the 1970s. Sarah Baartman's bodily parts were taken out of view due to a series of protests by feminists and were removed to a storeroom. After long negotiations between the French and the South-African governments, her remains were repatriated to South Africa to be buried. The ceremony took place on August 8, 2002, when the National Women's Day was being celebrated. The country was freed from the Dutch, the English and the Afrikaner, and the age of the Apartheid was over when the Venus Hottentot could finally rest in her homeland, close to the Gamtoos River. However, the recent changes in the country and the circumstances that surrounded these processes reflect how new arrangements need to be made to establish the role of new versions of colonialism and imperialism that determine our globalized presents (Ho 9). Chase-Riboud also deals with the problematization of South-Africa in her story of the Venus Hottentot. At the end of the novel and in her life as a specter, Sarah bears witness to many of the disastrous and terrible events in the process of decolonization and globalization of our contemporary world, like the conflicts in Europe, Africa, India, Korea, Vietnam, Palestine or Israel. These present the second half of the twentieth century's history as a tale of war and destruction. Dehumanization and brutalization are present in transnational relations between countries and also in areas which are fighting to recover their history and identity after colonization and independence like South-Africa. As a consequence, power relations still determine and condition the project of re-memory and recovery for those wishing to address the postcolonial trauma.

Writing back to colonialism is included in the agenda according to Chase Riboud's representation of contemporary reality in South-Africa. The country has gone through a process in which the traces of colonial exploitation and sexual abuse are painfully conspicuous, and are the side-effects that haunt the attempts at change. Political turmoil and the dynamics of "racial othering" that were prevalent in Britain, France and South-Africa at the time of Sarah Baartman's life can also be discerned in the post-Apartheid period. South-Africa's constitution is based on non-racial politics and social power is in the hands of the black majority. However, the legacy of Apartheid has been one of violence against women both in the public and domestic spheres; many women of color are still victims of rape, their bodies being subject to the commodification and sexual oppression of pornography and prostitution (Smith McKoy 92-94). Even issues like AIDS have been neglected by South-African public authorities who have been influenced by "the sexual ideology of colonial and apartheid racism." Some of these authorities have even ignored the relationship between the HIV virus and AIDS, denying treatment to people infected with the illness (Holmes 181-182). Therefore, similar atrocities to those of Empire are being committed against the black population of South-Africa, especially women.

Human acts of resistance depend on the support of various infrastructures at the social, political and economic level, in which the media have an essential role. Their participation as part of infrastructural support makes vulnerability and threat to particular groups visible, enhancing acts of solidarity and monitoring the use of visual images in the public sphere (Butler 14). Although Sarah Baartman's burial ceremony was staged in an attempt to achieve social justice and to represent the triumph of South-African women of color, proclaiming her as the country's mother and ancestor, black feminist movements and feminism in general need to get involved in the work of women's liberation from sexual exploitation, violence, abuse, destitution and disease. All this must happen both in western countries and ex-colonies in a process of negotiation of women's identities on equal terms with their male counterparts. In Butler's words, "feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance" as she argues that "feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities" (20).

Sarah's spirit pronounces these words: "I, Sarah Baartman, the dis-human, was now an icon for all human kind. The ten-thousand-voiced chorus of coloured women bore my coffin aloft as it slid forward onto that sea of hands and shoulders carrying me to my final and only resting place. I found that my tearless skeleton could only weep" (Chase-Riboud 316). She carries to her resting-place the grief and suffering of thousands and thousands of people. This is why we have to talk about "feminist praxis in global contexts," that is, contexts that involve a change in cultural relations from the local, regional, or national level to the world intercultural one. We need to aim at decolonization, a process which "involves thinking oneself out of the spaces of domination, but always within the context of a collective or

communal process." By doing this, women can achieve agency, understood as "the reproduction of the terms of our existence, while taking responsibility of this process," and this agency leads to wholeness, reclaiming black women's bodies, deviant bodies and colonized bodies as producers of knowledge (Alexander and Mohanty xxvii-xxviii). In other words, subaltern women must speak and define their identities, and neo-Victorian texts can give them voice through their postcolonial approach. Resistance and resilience claim mourning and restoration for the victims of violence, oppression and discrimination.

To conclude, this essay has tried to demonstrate that neo-Victorian fiction is concerned with rewriting the past, and this past includes the Victorian Empire and new forms of imperialism that continue to exist in our present. Neo-Victorian resilience and resistance become essential concepts; they are achieved through giving voice to colonial people who do not commonly appear in white history. In particular, neo-slave narratives become involved with re-counting the story of people victims of slavery and oppression while at the same time trying to write back to colonization and violence. The aim is to obtain forgiveness for the atrocities suffered by slave men and women and reconcile that shameful past with the future generations. In this sense, the word "rememory" and the idea of lived trauma are extremely relevant to the story not only of South Africa and the *Hottentot Venus* but also of other parts of the world where colonial traces still can be found. Making the *Venus Hottentot* a symbol of black woman's vulnerability during her life, Chase-Riboud transforms her in the embodiment of resistance and resilience after her death as a spirit, making use of the trope of neo-Victorian spectrality. In this way, the construction of black identity and subjectivity can be possible through experience and emotions.

Nonetheless, I tried to demonstrate the continued presence of colonial vestiges in the construction of national identities, making of South-Africa a painful example of the violence and discrimination exerted against black women after the Apartheid. Humanity is still denied to many groups of people in the country, this time including the white minority. Chase-Riboud calls trans-national feminism into action by giving black women power and agency to assert their subjectivities, drawing upon feminisms from different parts of the world. Her concern is to make equality a possible reality in our globalized cultures with the aim of decolonization. And it is here that the historical novel can bear witness to the institution of slavery and try to bring back civilization to our contemporary communities where new forms of imperialism are developing. Finally, the novel also calls for the psychological and political resistance present in vulnerability itself, making feminists responsible for the break of the binary opposition between vulnerability and agency, enhancing resilience and starting anew the history of black women's embodied lives.

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